Saint Patrick's Day Fun

By LAURINDA KEYS LONG

Throughout America's history, many of its citizens, or their ancestors, have come from Ireland. Every year, on March 17, even Americans who have no Irish ancestry join in the fun of watching or marching in parades, wearing something green, pinching those who don't wear that color and having traditional Irish food and drink, including green beer.

Saint Patrick's Day is not an official holiday in the United States, but in some large cities—such as New York, with the largest Saint Patrick's Day parade outside Ireland—it may as well be a day off from work since so many people are partying. The city of Chicago, Illinois, dyes its river green, and Savannah, Georgia, dyes the water in its downtown fountains green. Other towns paint green stripes down the centers of their main streets.

The first recorded Saint Patrick's Day parade in America was held in Boston, Massachusetts, in 1737, almost 40 years before there was a United States. More than half of the soldiers who fought in the Revolutionary War against British colonial rule had Irish ancestors. Nine men of Irish ancestry signed the Declaration of Independence. During the war, in 1780, General George Washington had so many soldiers of Irish descent in the Continental Army that he declared a holiday for all the troops under his command on March 17.

The day commemorates the death of Patrick, who died in the year 493 after being credited with bringing Christianity to his homeland, where he is considered the patron saint. The color green is associated with him as it is one of Ireland's national colors. Other images that are used in costumes and decorations on Saint Patrick's Day in the United States are: leprechauns, a mythical, magical creature from Irish folklore; and the three-leaf clover, or shamrock, a symbol of Ireland that Patrick had used to explain the Christian doctrine of the Trinity to the Irish people.

It's common to hear Americans say they are "Irish for a day" on Saint Patrick's Day, as they embrace the contributions that Irish immigrants have made to the nation. U.S. Census figures indicate more than 43 million Americans are of Irish descent, with a large number of them tracing their roots to ancestors who came to the United States to escape the Irish potato famine in the 1840s. But it's also a common belief among many other Americans that they have "a little Irish" in them, as the Irish immigrants inter-married and moved across the country, becoming part of the "melting pot" of nationalities and cultures that make up the United States. At least 19 American presidents have claimed to be partly Irish.

Above: The Chicago River goes green for Saint Patrick's Day.
Top right: A shamrock costume in the St. Louis, Missouri, parade.
Middle right: Shamrock eyeglasses and earrings in the Denver, Colorado, parade.
Right: As long as it's green, who cares in the Springfield, Missouri, parade.
Left: Dressed up as Saint Patrick in the Denver parade. The poodles wear green, too, so they don't get pinched.